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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to understand perceptions of custody arrangements from the perspective of children with a focus on sibling and stepsibling relationships, exploratory research was conducted. Lengthy, unstructured interviews were conducted with 12 college students who ranged in age from 18 to 37. Data were gathered on family communication and affection patterns, authority or power relations, coalition formation, cohesiveness and solidarity, and the development of trust and commitment. Several of the subjects had experienced a custody shift, most often occurring because the father sought and won custody. A common reaction to parental divorce was a drawing together of the sibling group. Factors affecting stepsibling relations were: (1) differential treatment by fathers and stepmothers or by stepfathers and mothers; (2) strained relations between stepsiblings while visiting the second home; and (3) differential treatment of "own" children versus stepchildren. Shared experiences, respect, and general liking served as a basis for stepsibling closeness. Subjects' family lives exhibited disruption. Negative feelings were more likely to be directed towards stepparents than toward stepsiblings. (ABL)

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PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGE OF CUSTODY AMONG STEPSIBLINGS

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PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGE OF CUSTODY AMONG STEPSIBLINGS

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My discussion today centers on the perceptions of custody arrangements from the perspective of children, with a particular focus on sibling and stepsibling relationships. I caution that the research is in the preliminary stages, and can only be described with that well-worn term "exploratory". My sample of children is small, only a dozen, and biased, constituting an availability sample of college students ranging in ages from 18 to 37. Data were obtained from intensive, unstructured interviews, lasting from one to two hours. The most notable bias that was evident from my interviews was that my respondents tended to be the most, or one of the most, stable children in the sibling group. That is, while these young men and women were evidently enjoying a successful college career, they described sibs who had run away from home, dropped out of school, married as teenagers, abused drugs, etc.

The research questions I raised were framed as follows: (1) Under what conditions does a custody shift take place? (2) How are sibling and stepsibling relationships affected by initial custody arrangements and subsequent custody shifts? (3) Is attachment (if evident) sustained after a custody shift takes place? The limited literature on sibling relationships was a primary source from which I derived potential explanatory concepts. From this literature I hypothesized that sibling access (influenced by age and sex), personality traits, family rules of distributive justice (fairness), and shared values, interests, and experiences would be the primary factors facilitating (step)sibling attachment. I also hypothesized that several processes of family interaction would play an important role in fostering sibling attachment. Therefore, I gathered data on family communication and affection patterns, authority or power relations, coalition formation, cohesiveness and solidarity, and the development of trust and commitment. With these variables in mind I began interviewing young people about their sibling experiences and perceptions of custody arrangements.

At the outset let me state that there is no precise knowledge about how much custodial shifting takes place. Grief (1985) reports that 19.6% of his father-custody sample (N=1136) had custody because their former wife could no longer handle the children. In another study of 517 mothers without custody Grief (forthcoming) reported 61% of the mothers had custody when the marriage ended, but subsequently lost it or gave it up. Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) report almost 20% of their Centre County, Pennsylvania respondents experienced a change in custody arrangements.

Sibling Interviews: Why do custody shifts take place?

Several of the young people I talked to had experienced a custody shift or they reported that some children in their family had shifted residence. Most of the time the shift occurred because a father sought legal custody and won a court decision. In some cases, children reached the age of 12 or 13 and chose to move to their father's residence. Some family

disorganization was evident in the mother-child families that were litigated, e.g., the mother had emotional problems, too many male visitors, or the children were unsupervised. One point that became clear from my interviews was that all children in the family did not welcome the change. Often a respondent would report that one child (usually a girl) was very unhappy in her father-stepmother's home, and wanted to return to her mother. There was usually evidence of a strong mother-daughter identification in these cases, or it was an older daughter who resented losing the independence she experienced in her mother's home.

In one case, Jill's stepfather had custody of four small children aged 1 through 4 at the time of his remarriage, because his former wife was hospitalized. Almost immediately after he remarried she was released and regained custody, staying in the same town as her ex-husband. These children visited their father, stepmother and two stepsisters (Jill and Kathy) every other weekend for the next five years. During these years the father fought for legal custody, and when Kirsten, the oldest, was in the eighth grade he was awarded custody of her. At this point the mother moved out of town with the other children and the family continued to see them only every other special holiday. The oldest boy, Ryan was very close to his dad and when he reached the age of 13 he chose to move to his father's home. The second boy did the same at age 13, and at that time the youngest, in the 6th grade, came also. According to Jill, Kirsten never got along with her stepmother nor her stepsister of the same age, although she and Jill got along fine. Kirsten was resentful and unhappy in her father's home. She had acted as caretaker of her younger brothers, and been given a great deal of freedom and autonomy while the children were all living with their mother; she resented the rules and restrictions imposed by her father and stepmother. She couldn't return to her mother, because, according to her stepsister, "the mother went wacko when the two youngest boys came to live with us. Their mom just left, saying, 'O.K., You take them all'. Then she just disappeared". The boys took this "very, very hard", and their father blamed himself. Soon after this happened Kirsten ran away, first to a friend, then a second time to her (maternal) grandmother. She dropped out of school while a junior in high school and the family has not been in touch with her since (two years ago). However, they do know that she is living with a man in a nearby town.

In Bob's case his father and mother divorced when he was an infant and his mother was granted custody. She had emotional problems, however, and was in and out of mental hospitals. Bob went to live with his paternal grandparents when his mother could no longer care for him. His father remarried when he was 5 and he went to live with his dad and stepmother who legally adopted him. (Bob's mother willingly signed the adoption papers). At age 12 his parents divorced and Bob stayed with his father although his stepmother wanted custody. His stepmother and two half-siblings, Jan aged 3 and Richard aged 5 moved to the mid-west. Bob and his stepmother "never did get along very well", but he is very close to his half-siblings. His father remarried two years after the divorce, when Bob was 14, and now there are two more half-siblings, of whom he is also very fond. Bob continues to visit his first stepmother, Richard, and Jan about once or twice a year, even though he and his stepmother don't get along "after more than about three days".

Another example of child-shifting involved two boys, Dan and Jim, aged 8 and 7 at the time of parental divorce. Their mother remarried right away,

and their father remarried 1 1/2 years later. After living with their mother and stepfather for five years, their stepfather's three children, aged 14, 12, and 10 came to live with them. Dan was 13 and Jim was 12 at this time. According to Dan, "their mother was single and was having troubles with them". Before his stepfather took custody and while they were only "visitors" to the home, Dan felt that he and his stepsiblings were friends and he was very fond of them. Even after they moved in, all the kids got along O.K. But, he said, his parents played favorites, and problems arose over "his" and "her" kids. Punishments were uneven between the kids. Dan experienced a great deal of peer pressure after the three stepsibling moved in, insofar as he was expected by his mother and stepfather to "report" on his two stepbrother's misbehavior, all the while trying to maintain loyalty to the stepbrothers. He claimed that this pressure ultimately was responsible for his choosing to move to his father's home. Dan said that he had always been "good", pretty shy and a good student. His stepbrothers taught him a lot, and he admitted to engaging in behaviors with them that he never would have thought of doing on his own. It was this negative peer influence that worried his mother. According to Dan she felt his formerly "good" behavior was jeopardized. Eventually the strain of trying to mediate between parents and stepbrothers resulted in the decision to live with his father. Dan reported that one month before he and Jim left, his second stepbrother moved back to his own mother's home, and from there moved to a foster home; three months after he and Jim changed residence the oldest stepbrother moved out, to be on his own; three months later his youngest stepsister moved back to her mother. In his father's family, he said his parents held "realistic expectations". At first he and Jim expresssed "a lot of verbal abuse" toward his younger half brother and sister, but it was generally ignored by his father and stepmother. During this time he and Jim became very close.

A fourth example of why custody shifts occur was provided by Toni, who was five at the time of her parent's divorce, and 11 when she moved to live with her father and stepmother. There were 6 children in this family. The oldest son, Keith, aged 15, moved to live with his father two months after the divorce. Within a year the oldest daughter left for college. At age 16 (four years post-divorce) Susan went to her father's home, and the two youngest, Kendra and Toni, moved there at ages 13 and 11, six years post-divorce. The fourth child, Carol, lived with her mother until she was 16 when she (Carol) married, about the same time Kendra and Toni shifted residence. There was one stepsister, Jennifer, living in their father's home, who was seven months older than Toni. According to Toni, while they lived with their mother there was very little supervision, a great deal of independence, "bad peer influence" and they were a lot poorer. She seemed to think the peer situation and lack of supervision were the primary reasons her father sought custody as each child reached adolescence. When Toni was 16 the family moved to the state of Washington, and at that time, at age 18, Kendra moved back with her mother. According to Toni, Kendra "never did like her stepmother".

An example of a potential future shift was described by Jean. Jean was 13 when her parents divorced, Lynn was 11, Tim was 7 and Michelle was 5. Her father has been trying to get custody of Jean's two youngest siblings, Tim and Michelle, ever since his divorce and immediate remarriage. When asked why her father was seeking custody, she explained, "Last Christmas when Tim and Michelle were visiting dad he had a psychological study done on them, and a house case study done. According to that report they showed

psychological distress, living here with my mom and my stepdad. That, and Tim has voiced a really strong interest in living with dad. Plus", and she laughed, "Tim is his only son." But tears welled in her eyes as she talked. "He never has been able to prove mom was an unfit mother. But now Tim and Michelle don't like their stepdad [of three years] and they want to go live with dad".

How are sibling and stepsibling relationships affected by initial custody arrangements and subsequent custody shifts?

One common reaction to a parental divorce that most respondents reported was a drawing together of the sibling group. The oldest child tended to take over childcare responsibilities for younger children which increased attachment. Older siblings often interpreted parental behavior to younger sibs, explaining the divorce and subsequent behavior to them.

Several factors seemed to affect stepsibling relations both before and after a custody shift. One of these was differential treatment by fathers and stepmothers (or mothers and stepfathers) of their "own" children vs. stepchildren. Strained relations between stepsibs were reported while visiting the second home where different disciplinary systems were in force. Most of my respondents perceived that their fathers did not "parent" (discipline/punish) their stepsibs in the same way that they themselves were parented. In the majority of cases stepsiblings were permitted to get away with behavior that they themselves would have been punished for, such as making a mess, talking back to a parent, etc. Resentment sometimes ensued, but it seems that most stepsiblings did not let this interfere with their relationships with each other in the long run. Rather it generated more dislike for the stepmother/stepfather. In the case of Toni, who had a stepsister,
Jennifer, 7 months older than herself, the differential treatment gradually brought the two girls closer together. Initially the stepsiblings in this family either fought or ignored one another. But by the time Toni and Jennifer were in the 7th grade (two years after Toni's custody shift) Jennifer was sticking up for Toni and taking her side when her mother would make demands on her stepsister, or expect her to do something that she didn't ask her own daughter to do. According to Toni, it was their common interests (school events, boys, etc.) that brought them together.

My respondents indicated at least one key factor creating closeness was identification with a stepsib, formed through shared experiences, respect, or general "liking". Shawn said of her stepbrother, "I called him my brother because I really liked him. When he talked about how strict his father was, we would laugh and say, Tell us about it..." Jill said of her troublesome stepsister, Kirsten, "I really liked her. She hung around with older people; She was introduced to everything". Dan was fond of this stepbrothers because they introduced him to experiences he never would have initiated on his own; experiences he felt were valuable to a teenage male. Jean attributed the closeness she feels with her younger sisters and brother to the responsibility she took for them after her parents divorced. Although her grandmother and grandfather moved into her mother's home, 13 year old Jean "took care of" 5 year old Michelle; bathing her, hearing her prayers, and putting her to bed each night. She tutored the younger children, and became their confidant. She perceived that the strain in the family after the divorce brought her, 11 year old Lynn and 7 year old Tim

closer together. Jean said of her stepbrother, Marty (her stepfather's son), "Marty's a real joker; we all love him...he's just like a little kid. He gets down on the floor and wrestles with them. He's just a big, tall, little kid".

Is attachment (if evident) sustained after a custody shift takes place?

Almost all the siblings I interviewed indicated that when attachment is present, fondness between siblings and stepsiblings continues in spite of distance or separate residence even though interaction possibilities decrease. In cases where there never was closeness between sisters and/or brothers, contact ceases. However, siblings appear to keep track of one another's doings. Jill and her family knew where Kirsten was even though there was no direct contact. Bob remains the beloved older brother to Richard and Jan even though their mother (his first stepmother) and dad are now divorced.

Conclusion

These data were gathered from an admittedly small sample of non-clinical young adults. However, while my respondents represent a group of seemingly well-adjusted, intelligent college students their disrupted family experiences have taken a toll. Bob talked of having "never felt being a real member of my family", and of being suicidal during his mid-teen years; Lynn began losing her hair after her father moved to Illinois with the woman he subsequently married; at least three sisters or stepsisters dropped out of school and married by age 16, and one is in her third marriage at age 21. Rachel, at age 37 my oldest respondent, married an alcoholic and speculated that her brother's drug problem, her sister's illigitimate pregnancies, and her own choice of husband were related in some way to their mother's suicide and their father's immediate marriage to their mother's cousin.

However, whatever the behaviors of fathers and mothers, a theme that emerged throughout these interviews was the central role that fathers played in these young people's lives. Some fathers obtained custody of one or more of the children, and others continued to fight in courts for custody. Even in cases where most of the interview centered on a stepfather's struggle to gain custody or after custody was granted the problems that were encountered in rearing the children, my respondents reported that their own fathers played a salient role in their lives. In all cases there was some degree of visiting, and some level of continued financial support. Only subsequent research will discover if this involvement was an idiosyncratic aspect of these few children's lives and atypical of the majority of children. What information we do have suggests that fathers generally are not in contact with their children after about four years post-divorce. However, if the few case studies reported here are typical of formerly married partners, then a variety of initial unpleasant experiences between ex-spouses may be the precipitating factor that disassociates fathers and their children over time.

The general attitude of these children appeared to be one of general acceptance and affection for stepsiblings. Only occasionally did stepsibs dislike each other, and even then the negative feelings did not extend across the sibling group. Rather, feelings of hostility were expressed

toward only one sib. More frequently, hostility and dislike were expressed toward the new stepmother or, in some cases, stepfather. When a respondent reported very positive feelings about a parent's remarriage, it was generally the parent they most identified with whose new partner they approved of.